

Fighting from Rapidly Moving Armored Personnel

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For the last two major conflicts the Marine Corps has been engaged (Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom), it lost a significant amount of training and preparation time due to the need to reorganize its infantry units into mechanized forces in order to be able to move across the vast distance both missions required. This is because the Marine Corps' peacetime organization does not have an infantry unit with organic mechanized assets attached. The Corps has identified the requirement to fight far beyond the littorals and move great distances inland. However, it has failed to see the need to continuously train with the assets that will allow it to do so. Fighting from rapidly moving armored personnel carriers (APC) is a perishable skill that infantryman must continually train with in order to be successful on the battlefield. Therefore, the Corps must commission a dedicated mechanized infantry unit(s) in order to allow it to fight with better trained personnel and preplanned logistical support inherent to a dedicated mechanized force.

For both operations mentioned earlier, the Marine Corps identified the need to be able to rapidly transport its forces towards its objectives and then realized that using mechanized assets would best accomplish the tasks. Amphibious assault battalions with APCs were attached to infantry regiments to carry troops and equipment across the battlefield. And

although the mission was always accomplished, significant "growing pains" of two separate units meeting for the first time on a hostile battlefield emerged. Foot mobile units were suddenly forced to realize the need for vehicle maintenance that had previously not entered their training cycle. Conversely, the assault amphibious vehicle (AAV) crews now had to deal with twenty or more troops riding in the rear of their vehicle which had previously carried their logistical needs during their training.

There are several definitions or ideas as to what the term mechanized infantry refers. According to Besch, mechanized infantry is subdivided into three different categories based on tactical roles. The first is armored infantry and it is based on an armored (tank oriented) battalion or higher force supported by infantry in some sort of APCs. Mechanized light infantry is the second type and it encompasses those traditional roles of infantry supported by tanks. The last is known as mechanized airborne infantry which requires APCs and Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs) to be able to be airlifted¹. For the purposes of this essay, mechanized forces will closely resemble the second type but refers more to medium armored vehicles which carry significant firepower and can carry at least a squad of troops. The primary weapon within this force must still remain the troops inside. Most mechanized forces

fight from within the vehicle and deploy only a limited distance from them. Marine infantry must retain the ability to fight anywhere and not become reliant on vehicular movement or support. This is simply due to the limited number of Marine infantry and the fact that it would be much more cost efficient for a unit to be able to fight two separate ways than to create two separate units (although the latter would be preferred). We must be able to fight in the hills of Korea and the streets of Iraq.

The Marine Corps was originally founded to operate against enemy forces occupying the immediate vicinity of defended littorals, to seize openings for the Army to push forward and continue prolonged battles and wars. However, as evident in Iraq and Afghanistan, Marine infantry units have fought over hundreds of miles and are executing long term operations well inland which requires those units to re-organize themselves continually to be able to maintain operational tempo. During the initial invasion of Operation Iraqi Freedom, three infantry regiments were married up with AAV units in order to carry troops over the 400 mile invasion into Baghdad. Although this seems as a simple means of getting troops to where they need to go, several issues arise when two distinct units are attached which has created a definite argument for

re-organizing the infantry and the APCs that carry them into one single unit.

As mentioned earlier, the Marine Corps is now fighting forces well beyond the littorals which creates a need to move troops farther than ever but it still must maintain the "light" characteristics that allow it to rapidly deploy and secure beach heads as it was intended. Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) are well suited for these missions and the units that comprise them should stay focused on those missions and leave well-enough alone. The Seventh Marine Regiment is the only regiment within the Marine Corps that does not detach any of its forces into a MEU and is probably the best suited to become the Marine Corps' premier dedicated mechanized regiment. Since all Marine infantry regiments are identical in structure and capability, any one of them could become reorganized into a mechanized force. However, Seventh Marines' location, general training habits, and typical missions make it an ideal candidate to assume the role as the Marine Corps' dedicated mechanized infantry unit and will be used as a template periodically in this essay.

One of Seventh Marines current missions is to respond to any crisis in the world by flying into a nearby safe zone and marrying up with pre-staged equipment on Maritime Pre-Positioning Force (MPF) ships. Having pre-staged APCs such as

the new Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV) would greatly alleviate the need to spend months using naval assets to transport the APCs to the fight. MEUs can only embark a limited number of EFVs and their logistical requirements, which would not be enough of a capability to move very far inland. MPF off-load of APCs would allow 7th Marines to take advantage of ports seized by MEUs and then be able to move inland to seize further objectives.

Training poses the largest argument in support of creating a dedicated mechanized force. When two units are attached to fight battles, each unit must understand how the other works and learn specific details of the others day to day SOPs that allow them to fight efficiently. This process is exaggerated when a foot mobile force marries up with a mechanized unit. Mechanized units require significant amounts of maintenance time that are barely understood by foot mobile commanders who previously were concerned mainly that his troops had clean M-16s and good soled boots. Infantry commanders too often are frustrated with their supporting APCs when the commander of that mechanized unit informs him that three APCs are not functional and therefore the troops dedicated to those APCs will have to pile into others. Often the problems that cause malfunctioning APCs are simply preventative maintenance that the APC crews are under-staffed to execute in a time sensitive

environment. Here is where the troops in the back could play a significant role maintaining operational capability of those APCs. It is simply a matter of working and training together on a day to day basis.

Training is again affected before and even after the order to attach infantry and mechanized forces is given. Prior to attaching both types of units, smaller infantry units such as battalions spend significant amounts of time trying to determine how they will load all of the gear onto APC long before they even know what level of support the potential APC supporting units will bring. This time could be better used by planners to plan mission specific training that may not require support of the APCs. Having the mechanized assets organic to an infantry unit would allow them to "concentrate on the enemy more and worry less about how we are going to get there."² Once the order is given, the unit assigned command of the two units (usually the infantry) spends significant amounts of time determining minute details such as reporting procedures and who goes on what vehicle for movements. These are all issues that are easily identified in training and can be used to develop standard operating procedures.

The largest problem concerning training is the failure to properly employ each separate unit's specialty so that they compliment each other. Infantry leaders thrown into the back

of AAVs often forget that the AAV they are getting out of has two very capable weapon systems that provide excellent support by fire (Mk-19s and .50 cal). Troops too often feel that those weapons are simply self defense measure in times of complete crisis. Once the EFV is fielded with its 30mm cannon, infantry commanders cannot afford to waste the direct fire capabilities that weapon system offers³.

Mechanized forces are most capable in large open spaces that allow freedom of vehicular formations and the stand-off of the large caliber weapon systems that they carry. Here again is why Seventh Marines provides an excellent capability to assume the role of mechanized infantry. Their location in Twentynine Palms offers the most terrain with which to practice large formations and also to employ the large weapon systems that AAVs, eventually the EFV, carry. Twentynine Palms would allow mechanized forces to move continually for days without entering the same area twice.

The most logical argument for combining the Corps' mechanized forces with its infantry is simply because its current mechanized forces have no other mission except to carry and support infantry. It can be said that the entire Marine Corps is there to support the infantry but only Marine mechanized forces (AAVs) have no other role but to carry troops. When the AAV was first introduced in 1972, its

primary mission was assaulting beaches and its secondary mission was transporting troops and supplies inland⁴. It was never intended to be a force on its own and is still employed today as a supporting force. Since AAVs (and most likely EFVs) will not be employed as a main effort, why leave them to train on their own as a sole force.

Finally, combining the two would alleviate huge manpower requirements and possibly reduce the shortage of senior enlisted personnel and limited number of officers to fill two separate units. For example, separate infantry and AAV companies require two separate chains of command (CO, XO, 1stSgt, Co GySgt, etc). Combining the two reduces the manpower requirement by half. Once AAV units are tasked out to infantry units, the commanders in charge of those AAVs simply become advisors to the infantry commander. It is simply a waste of an un-restricted officer and senior enlisted personnel.

If the Marine Corps infantry is going to continually receive missions beyond the scope of our original capability, we must re-evaluate our structure and how we train and fight. Our missions in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown the importance of infantry and mechanized forces working together. We must further this relationship by commissioning a dedicated

mechanized infantry unit to rapidly deploy and fight anywhere in the world.

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